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The Ways of Expression of Cultural Norms in the Egyptian Dialect

Abstract

In this paper I am going to present the ways in which the Egyptian dialect renders social norms, which will be illustrated by the examples of expressions regarding human-to-human interaction. This provides an outline of the existent system of values with special emphasis laid upon the values of collectivism and individualism (perceived in the categories of cross-cultural psychology) and related phenomena. The basis for cultural norms reflected in the language will be the two different systems of values, that is to say collectivism and individualism. The clash between the two systems is especially significant in the period of growing transformation of the Arab world in the direction of modernity and globalization. The criteria for the two values have been taken from the work by David Y a u - F a i H o and Chiu C h i - Y u e *Component Ideas of Individualism Collectivism and Social Organization. An Application in the Study of Chinese Culture* which will be quoted below. Their source are Egyptian TV series and theatrical scripts and analyses.

In my analysis the focus will be on the following issues: From the Perspective of Collectivism: 1. Expressions used in everyday tribal and family life: owing to mutual relationships, including the issues that are characteristic of Arabic culture, such as endogamic marriages or expressions going beyond the sense of kinship relationships; 2. The ways of expression of the various types of the sense of identity. From the Perspective of Individualism: 1. The expressions that are important in the relations between individuals: owing to close relationships, positive and hostile feelings, the need to be accepted. 2. Description of one's own condition. 3. Expressions stemming from the need to have one's own expression: exclamations, cries, proverbs, idioms and religious phrases and expressions.

From the Perspective of Collectivism

Within the framework of collectivism the expressions are shaped in the field of tribal and family life which are the source of the most popular behavioral patterns in Arabic culture. Tribe was the basic form of a collective in the past; today it is being replaced by the kinship system and the multigenerational family emerging from it. It is precisely to this type of family that one of the basic principles of collectivism is referred. *The supremacy of the group or collective, the principle that the value of survival of the collective takes precedence over that of the individual.*¹

The concern for the community as a source of identity and survival gave rise to the famous Arabic ethos of solidarity and loyalty towards tribal groups, the elders and the fellow tribesmen. At the same time, the sense of solidarity was not uniform; if the need arose, it applied to the whole tribe or to some of its minor groups. This complex strategy is illustrated by the language in the form of the popular proverb:

Ana w-ahūy, 'alā-bn-i 'ammi, w-ana wi-bn-i 'ammi 'ala-l-ḡarīb. – I and brother (stand) against my cousin, and I and my cousin (stand) against a stranger.²

On the one hand, the tribal system is the source of the sense of honor, which is so important in Arabic culture; on the other hand, it has been the source of the fundamental norms of family life up to the present day. Nowadays, the superior importance of honor in the life of an Arabic patriarchal family seems to be demonstrated rather by the two symbolical and customary expressions

W-Allāh-il- 'aẓīm bi-t-talāta – I swear by my three-times divorce
and

'Alayya ṭalāq – may I get divorced!

This famous oath of which the guarantee indicating the honorable conduct is one's own marriage, is an echo of the collectivism of tribal relationships. People still swear by their honor, either by their own honor or by the honor of the members of their family. There exists a popular exclamation:

Wi-šarafī – by my honor!

and another example of such phrase is:

Wi-šaraf abūyya – by the honor of my father!³

The echoes of tribal customs can be found in the contemporary Egyptian dialect. The custom of tribal revenge can be encountered in the saying:

Ḥaqqu dammak – he/she has the right to your blood⁴

¹ David Yau-Fai Ho, Chiu Chi-Yue, *Component Ideas of Individualism, Collectivism and Social Organisation: An Application in the Study of Chinese Culture*, in: U. Kim, H.C. Triandis, Ç. Kâğıtçıbaşı, S. Choi, G. Yoon (ed.) *Individualism and Collectivism. Theory, Method, and Applications*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1994, p. 139.

² F.M. Mahgoub, *A Linguistic Study of Cairene Proverbs*, Indiana University, Bloomington, Mouton & Co., The Hague 1968, p. 79.

³ N. 'Āšūr, *Masraḥ Nu'mān 'Āšūr*, Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li-al-Kitāb, Al-Qāhira 1974, p. 20.

⁴ *Ad-Dunya riša fi hawa* ["World is like a feather in the wind"], TV Egypt 2007, director Maḥmūd Bakrī.

Nevertheless, expressions and phrases used in the language reflect, in the first place, the ethos of family life, which is still present, to a greater or smaller extent, in our times, thus emphasizing the importance of descent, marriage, offspring, bonds and relationships between children and parents with special reference to parental rights towards their children. There have been popular forms of address stemming from the system of values which was binding over the centuries.

Ancestry

The genealogy of the *nasab* has been an important background of social relationships over the centuries, in the period of poorly marked history, and after the emergence of Islam parallel to this history, it reflected the course of the community life. The traces of this genealogy can be seen in the Egyptian dialect, its example being the expression

Ya bu nasab – the exclamation meaning no less than “oh, you being of good descent” or “oh, you descending from a good family.”⁵

By and large, the importance of the descent of the given individual is illustrated by such sayings as: *huwwa min aṣl-i ṭayyib* – he is of good descent.

And this importance can hardly be overestimated since in the colloquial Egyptian one may encounter the following piece of advice:

Ḥūd i-l-aṣīla, wi-nām ‘ala-l-ḥasīra – Marry a woman of noble origin, and sleep on a mat (for then you will be happier).⁶

As well as a slightly ambiguous statement applies, however, to the same issue: ‘*Umr-i damm-i ma yibqāš mayya* – blood never changes to water.’⁷

The virtues of the daughter as a candidate for wife may be illustrated by her relationship with the family, and her mother argues that *Hiyya mītrabbiyya ni‘mat it-tarbiyya* – she has been brought up in the best possible way.⁸

Marriage and Offspring

The importance of marriage and offspring in the Arabic tradition is especially bound up with such an important condition for the collectivist system of values as: *Collective development and actualization*. To confirm this rule one may quote the following Egyptian proverb:

Iz-zawāg nuṣṣ id-dīn – Marriage is half the religion.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ F.M. Mahgoub, op. cit., p. 86.

⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸ *Ad-Dunyā rīša fi hawā*.

⁹ F.M. Mahgoub, op. cit., p. 65.

Language reflects the bonds linking parents with their children, which can be seen in their conversations. Mother will emphasize her concern for her daughter by the use of the following expression:

Ya binti baṭni – (lit.) the daughter of my abdomen (implicitly: “my child”).

Father, on the other hand, demands obedience from his daughter. According to his will she should agree to marry an elderly unwanted man; he will remind the young girl of her obligations towards her father in the following words:

Ma tuḥrugīš min bāb i-ṭ-ṭā'a – the rule of obedience should be observed.¹⁰

Children are the pride of their parents and families and they are their hope for the future, which is reflected in the Egyptian proverb:

Ḥūdu fa'lkum, min 'iyālkum – Take you good omen from your youngsters.¹¹

The guarantee of this pride is a severe upbringing which allows one to inculcate impeccable moral principles and knowledge in their offspring. This will be expressed by the father in the TV series entitled *Šams tušriq da'iman* [“The Sun always shines”] in his conversation with the people surrounding him:

*Ma 'ašan ibni lāzim ašidd-i 'alay. Ḥaftaḥir bih. W-ana 'āyiz eḥ aktar?*¹² – It's because he is my son I will be severe with him. I will be proud of him. What else do I need?

The offspring is an indispensable theme of the most popular greetings, such as:

Iz-zayy ḥadritak w-iz-zayy-awlād – how are you and how are your children¹³ and the way of introducing oneself, for example: *'Andina arba' wilad wi-ḥamas banāt* – at us four boys and five girls.¹⁴

In conversations and texts the recurring theme is the concern for the children which is expressed in the sentences such as:

Allāh yiṭawwil 'umrik w-y(i)ḥallik ibnik – May God lengthen your life and leave your son.¹⁵

Allāh ma yiḥrimnīš minnak abadan – God will not take you away from me;

A common expression is the phrase: *ya danāya* – my child.

Children, just like fathers, are the most precious value to the speaker, which enables us, by referring to their importance, to confirm the dimensions of the oath taken.

Wi-ḥ(i)yāt ibni!/abūyya! – by the life of my son/my father!¹⁶

The attachment to one's own family is corroborated by the following proverb which can often be heard in the Egyptian TV series:

Qāl mīn a'azz-i mi-l-wild, qāl wild il-wild – He asked “what is dearer than a child?” “A grandchild”, he said.¹⁷

¹⁰ *Ad-Dunyā rīša fi hawā.*

¹¹ F.M. Maḥgoub, op. cit. o. 87.

¹² *Šams tušriq da'iman*, TV Libya 2007, director Šaraf ad-Dīn.

¹³ T.F. Mitchell, *An Introduction to Egyptian Colloquial Arabic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978, p. 132.

¹⁴ D. Berberi, *Arabic in a Nutshell*, Institute for Language Study, Funk & Wagnalls, New York 1976, p. 236.

¹⁵ T.F. Mitchell, *An Introduction*, p. 149.

¹⁶ D. Berberi, op. cit. p. 223.

¹⁷ F.M. Maḥgoub, op. cit., p. 103.

The language expresses tradition according to which fathers have the right even to their grown up children and they authoritatively decide upon the marriages of their daughters. Their will is sacred in this respect, and any interference is considered to be against the established customs. The proverb says as follows:

Abūha rāḍi, w-ana rāḍi, w-inta malak wi-malna ya qaḍi – Her father approves (lit. 'is satisfied), I approve, so what have you to do, o judge?¹⁸

Forms of Address

In the Egyptian dialect there are popular forms of address stemming from the conditioning of the family life and the kinship system. By and large, their source is collectivism, and yet since they typically express personal relationships of the speaker with his/her interlocutor, they are heading towards individualism. As the language demonstrates, in the intergenerational relationships the collectivist attitude and the individualistic attitude struggle for the victor's palm. In the Egyptian TV series from which the material for this paper has been partly taken, children, small and adult alike, address their parents alternately by using the official phrases such as: when addressing their father they say *ḥaḍritak* (mister, sir), *abi* (father) and *bāba* – (dad) and when addressing their mother they use the expression *ḥaḍritik* (mrs, madam), *ummi* (mother) and *māma* (mum).

The dialect shows that the tension in the relationships between children and parents, which stems from the struggle between the need to express emotions and the sense of duty to social requirements, is a cultural norm in this case. Maybe there is nothing strange about it since, contrary to the conditioning of the collectivism, young people do strive for independence and self-realization, which is illustrated by an expressive (though perhaps too strong) proverb:

Iksar li-bint-i ḍi'l, yiṭla'laha-tnēn – Break your daughter's rib, and two ribs will grow (instead).¹⁹

Ibn-i 'amm, ibn-i ḥāl – male cousin; *bint-i 'amm, bint-i ḥāl* – female cousin used within the framework of endogamy serve to strengthen the kinship and family system regardless of the feelings of an individual.

The tradition of the family life gives rise to the forms of address that are popular in the Egyptian society. Some common forms include:

Ya aḥi – brother (!) or *ya ḥūyya* – little brother (!), *ya 'ammi* – paternal uncle (!), *ya ḥāl* – uncle (!) or their feminine equivalents: *ya uḥti*- sister (!), *ya 'ammiti* – aunt (!) – (from one's father's side), *ya ḥalti* – aunt! (from one's mother's side). They emphasize the function of the members of a collective and community as a source of identity in the life of an individual. The popularity of those linguistic forms corresponds also to the successive characteristics of the collectivism described by the above-mentioned

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

psychologists: *To be found the groups's solidarity and integrity*²⁰ and *to prefer the company of others.*²¹

The interlocutors, who address themselves using the aforesaid terms, express group solidarity, and a certain dose of emotion accompanying each of the exclamations indicates that they strive to be together and that they keep searching for their own company.

The exclamations *ya ahi*, *ya 'ammi*, *ya hali*, etc. going far beyond the kinship relationships constitute symbolical forms of address on the social scale intended to seek closer relations with people, which is a kind of promotion of collective attitudes.

Similar functions are performed by the following popular form of address: *ya šayh*, in the feminine version *ya šayha*, within the framework of which the nouns used create a vast semantic field. After all, etymologically, *šayh* and *šayha* mean “an old man” and “an old woman”, and, at the same time, those are the terms denoting chiefs of tribes and various authorities, including religious, spiritual and moral authorities. Nowadays, those expressions may be addressed to any elderly persons whose importance is to be emphasized by the speaker.

In the Muslim era the terms *hāgg* (in the masculine gender) and *hāgga* (in the feminine gender) took shape meaning “pilgrim”, which denotes a person who went on a pilgrimage to Mecca; it has been adopted as a form of address which is popular in the Muslim community, including the Egyptian society. Today, the term, which is commonly used in accordance with its meaning, has come to be a polite expression in Egypt too. It has been used not only to denote men and women who can boast a pilgrimage to Mecca, but also to address elderly persons who have never gone on a pilgrimage or when the interlocutor does not know anything about this fact; however, the speaker wants to show respect to those persons by assuming that, potentially, they are pilgrims (they will make a pilgrimage some day in the future).

The popular and commonly used forms of address which appraise a given individual in a positive way, such as:

Ibn in-nās – son of the people (implicitly: “son of good (noble) people, of good ancestry”)

and

Bint in-nās – daughter of the people (implicitly: “daughter of good (noble) people, of good descent”)²²

They are based on family relationships. After all, those expressions indicate that good ancestry obliges one to scrupulously observe social norms.

Popular are the forms addressed to the group as a whole, for example:

Ya 'alam (lit.) oh, the world!, oh, the people!²³

Ya nās – oh, the people!²⁴

²⁰ D. Yau - Fai Ho, Chi Yue - Chi u, op. cit., p. 141.

²¹ Ibid.

²² ‘*Ā'is̄ fi al-ḡaybāba* [“A'esh unaware”], TV Egypt 2007, director Muḥammad Šubḥī.

²³ N. ‘*Ā š ū r*, op. cit., p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

The reflection of the collectivist consciousness seems to be the popular expression *ya gamā'a*, which literally means “group”, although it may be addressed even to a small number of people: three or even two persons, hence it can hardly be translated into foreign languages; it can be replaced by the expressions describing addresses such as: colleagues, friends, or it may even mean “my dear ones”.

Sense of identity

Within the framework of collectivism develop various types of the expressing of identity which are reflected in the above-mentioned forms of address. This is of particular importance as in the opinion of Reykowski: “Individuation and identification are the two opposing processes. Individuation leads to the development of an image of a (social) world as consisting of a number of separate objects (individuals). If applied to oneself, it contributes to the growing differentiation of ‘I/they’. The process of identification, on the other hand, blurs the boundaries between ‘I’ and ‘they’ and fosters a conception of the self as similar or identical of others.”²⁵

In this approach, *collectivism* is a value indispensable for the emergence of any group consciousness and it strictly determines the sense of identity.

Ho and Chiu emphasize its importance for collectivism: *collective identity, defined by group membership and uniformity, conformity to an ideal, and model emulation.*²⁶

The expression of thus conceived identity of the entire groups are phrases such as:

Ihna l-'Arab – We are the Arabs,

Ihna š(u)hāb – We are friends,

Ihna nās galāba – We are poor people.

The Egyptian dialect, however, encompasses the forms defining the degree of uniformity of the speaker with his/her interlocutor, as well as its reflection in human consciousness. The expressions adopted allow one to describe the type of that uniformity: from the feeling of a communion through the search for mutual approval to the need for a simple communication in the issues of mutual interest.

An extreme form of this state of affairs is the feeling of a complete identification of the two speakers. The Egyptian dialect has at its disposal the expressions which simply point to the obliteration of boundaries between the individuals, their feeling of complete communion or striving for this communion. *Do things together. Collective efforts are superior,*²⁷ say the authors of the quoted work when they describe collectivism.

This rule can be seen in particular in the two Egyptian sayings:

²⁵ J. Reykowski, *Collectivism and Individualism as Dimensions of Social Change*, in: U. Kim et al., op. cit., p. 279.

²⁶ D. Yau-Fai Ho, Chi Yue-Chiu, op. cit., p. 139.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 140.

Maḥš farq – there is no difference between us
and

Iḥna wāḥid – we are the one.²⁸

These sentences tend to abolish the sphere of privacy. They are the sign of a material and psychic community of the two individuals. They are also used when, for example, people talk about financial issues and they need to share costs, suggesting that it is unimportant which of the two persons will bear them. The situation *maḥš farq* also means that the persons taking part in a conversation may know everything about one another and that they may tell themselves everything, even the most intimate details, which, in different conditions, would remain secret. Today the meaning of those expressions may be close to their literal sense, however more often their meaning becomes symbolical and polite in character. Significantly, each of those sayings weakens an individualized dimension of the speaker for the benefit of his feeling of group affiliation.

Next, the language expresses the situations in which individuals constitute clearly separate beings, but the keeping of group uniformity demands a continuing search for mutual approval²⁹ and the tightening of bonds. Therefore, of particular popularity are the requests:

‘*Ašān ḥaṭri-* for the sake of my importance,

I‘mil il-ma‘rūf – do a good deed to me

and

the incantation: *wi-ḥ(i)yātak* – by your life.

A similar implication is encountered in the offering of the owned property made spontaneously for the benefit of the interlocutor:

Bēt bitak – my house is yours,

Maḥall-i maḥallak- my shop is yours³⁰

and

in the following declarations: *Inti ḥayāti* – you are my life

Ta‘bak rāḥa – your tiring is my pleasure

Inta-bni ḥalāl – you are the child of righteousness.³¹

The emphasis placed on the relation with the speaker is illustrated by the following expressions:

W-ana fi ḥidmitak – I and I am at your service,

Ya baḥtak- Oh luck-your!, How lucky you are!³²

Waḥaštūna – I missed you.

²⁸ Compare E. Machut-Mendecka, *Współcześni Arabowie: próba analizy psychologicznej* [“The Contemporary Arabs. An Attempt at a Psychological Analysis”] in: A. Borowiak, P. Szarota (ed.), *Tolerancja i wielokulturowość* [“Multi-cultural Aspects of Toleration”], Warszawa 2004, p. 101.

²⁹ S. Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1960, p. 28.

³⁰ T.F. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 148.

³¹ Ibid., p. 135.

³² D. Berberi, op. cit., p. 222.

reflected in a very clear manner, obviously with an exaggeration which is characteristic of Ašūr's comedies, in a sentence taken from his theatrical play:

Ma fiš ḥadd-i qalbu 'ala ḥadd- in-nahārda – Nobody shows kindness to the other person (implicitly: “Nobody worries about others”, “Everybody lives to oneself”).⁴³

From the Perspective of Individualism

The conditioning of the collectivism leads to the emergence of an individual, and the expressions in the Egyptian dialect suggest the individualistic attitudes based on the principle of opposition formulated by Reykowski and defined by Ho and Chiu as individuality-uniformity. The language illustrates what those two authors call *individuation, individuality and uniqueness of the individual*.⁴⁴ The speaker proves that he/she can define himself/herself as an independent individual with no point of reference, such as the society or the other person.

Self-concept

The speaker is of course capable to describe his/her own state. The examples are following expressions:

Ana farḥān – I am content.

Ana mabsūt arba'a w-i'šrīn qirāṭ – I am happy (lit. “I am happy twenty-four qerat”).⁴⁵

Ana miš sa'īd – am unhappy.

Ana ḡalbān – I am poor.

Ana rāḡil ḡalbān/ana sitt-i ḡalbāna – I am a poor man / I am a poor woman.⁴⁶

Il-wiḥda ḥayrun min galīs is-sūq – Better be alone than in ill company.⁴⁷

The speaker is capable of experiencing a deeper expression of his/her own without referring to the other individual which is invisible in the field of vision. He/she is free to assert:

Bi-šarafī! – by my honor!⁴⁸

Iš-Šabr tayyib – patience is good.

He expresses astonishment, admiration, awe, etc., and he even uses exclamations eg. *ya salām, ya ḥ(u)sāra*, – oh peace!, oh loss!

Mumtāz – fine! excellent, outstanding.⁴⁹

⁴³ N. 'Āšūr, op. cit., p. 135.

⁴⁴ D. Yau-Fai Ho, Chi Yue-Chiu, op. cit., p. 139.

⁴⁵ F.M. Mahgoub, op. cit., p. 113.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁸ D. Berberi, op. cit., p. 223.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 222.

Since those utterances are spontaneous, they escape the mechanism of social control. The speaker allows his/her emotions to be disclosed, thus realizing his/her own needs and revealing, even for a short while, his/her nature regardless of the consequences.

Religious expressions

In the Arabic language, just as in the Egyptian dialect, there are many religious expressions, so it is worth drawing attention to what system of values they are related. Thus, the authors quoted above prove that within the framework of individualism: “Religious beliefs and salvation are highly personal; the individual needs no intermediaries. Emphasis is on the individual’s personal relationship with the divine.” Whereas the collectivism is characterised by “participation in group worship. Personal salvation linked to the salvation of others. Membership in a religion institution is essential.”⁵⁰

Exclamations with religious contents do not belong to the practices required by Islam but they stem from the speaker’s own inner need, so that they testify to the individualistic attitudes. Here are the examples of such popular expressions:

Allāh subḥān Allāh! Wallāh, w-Allāhi, subḥān-Allāh – God, Praise God!, Good Lord, really, By my-God, by heavens!⁵¹

W-n-nābi! – by my Prophet-my!, By heavens!⁵²

Wi-ḥ(i)āt Rabbina! – by life of our God!, please!⁵³

This group may also comprise the expressions referring to more implicit religious meanings, such as the belief in destiny and its comforting character for man.

The expression *il-qisma w-in-nasīb* (fortune and destiny),⁵⁴ means that by emphasizing the fatalistic character of his situation, man releases himself from remorse and makes it easier for himself to resign and accept the situation, and – in the case of traumatic experiences – to return to life.

On the border of collectivism and individualism there are various types of everyday talks, which may contain fewer expressions and idioms, and which serve the need for mutual communication. They encompass conversations and phrases expressing the striving to maintain balance between the speaker and his/her interlocutor and to keep distance between them.

⁵⁰ D. Yau-Fai Ho, Chi Yue-Chiu, op. cit., p. 141.

⁵¹ D. Berberi, op. cit., p. 223.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ N. ‘Āšūr, op. cit., p. 26.